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FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO ALL EAST ASIAN AND PACIFIC DIPLOMATIC POSTS
AIT TAIPEI 0000
AMEMBASSY LONDON
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AMCONSUL SHANGHAI
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AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
USCINCPAC HONOLULU
XMT AMEMBASSY KOROR
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S E C R E T STATE 260249

USTR FOR SANDS/LEHR

E.O. 12356: DECL: 11/3/05

TAGS: [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: // INR ASSESSMENT // - NORTH KOREA - DANGER IN THE WIND

DOD/ISA/AP FOR EIKENBERRY, NSC FOR ROTH/SUETTINGER, NSA
FOR LANDIS, DIA FOR NIXON, CIA WASHDC, LONDON FOR HALL,
ROME PLEASE PASS EMBASSY VATICAN

[1](#)1. SECRET ENTIRE TEXT

[1](#)2. THE FOLLOWING INR ASSESSMENT WAS PRODUCED BY THE
OFFICE OF EAST ASIA AND PACIFIC AND IS PROVIDED FOR YOUR
INFORMATION AND COMMENT.

[1](#)3. (SUMMARY) PYONGYANG'S ECONOMIC DISTRESS AND
CONTINUING POLITICAL PARALYSIS RAISE QUESTIONS ABOUT
WHETHER THE CURRENT NORTH KOREAN REGIME CAN LAST THE
WINTER. IF PRAGMATISTS IN THE LEADERSHIP ARE UNABLE TO
SHOW TANGIBLE BENEFITS FROM THE AGREED FRAMEWORK SOON,
CONTINUED DETERIORATION OF THE ECONOMY AND WORSENING FOOD
SHORTAGES COULD PROMPT A TAKEOVER BY MILITARY HARDLINERS.

THE NORTH KOREAN MILITARY ARE NOT "MODERNIZERS"--THEIR
COMING TO POWER WOULD GREATLY RAISE TENSIONS AND SHARPLY
INCREASE THE DANGER OF WAR. THERE IS EVIDENCE OF CONCERN
WITHIN THE LEADERSHIP OVER THE MILITARY'S INTENTIONS.

[1](#)4. WE DISAGREE WITH ASSESSMENTS, PRIMARILY FROM SOUTH
KOREA, THAT PERSONNEL CHANGES IN THE NORTH IN MID-OCTOBER
HAVE ALREADY PUT THE MILITARY IN CONTROL. THE NORTH'S
NEGOTIATIONS WITH KEDO AND THE CLEAR, CONSISTENT SIGNALS
IT IS SENDING SUPPORTING THE AGREED FRAMEWORK SUGGEST
THAT, SO FAR, THE AGREEMENT'S FOES HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO
DERAIL IT OR SIGNIFICANTLY IMPEDE ITS IMPLEMENTATION.

UNCOMMON FLEXIBILITY.

[1](#)5. THE NORTH'S DELEGATES TO THE KEDO TALKS INSISTED
CRITICS WERE PRESSING THEM TO SECURE AN LWR SUPPLY
AGREEMENT, BUT USED THE POINT LESS TO PRESSURE KEDO THAN
AS A RATIONALE FOR MODIFYING THEIR OWN NEGOTIATING
POSITION.

[1](#)6. OTHER SIGNALS ARE CONSISTENT WITH THIS
INTERPRETATION. FOR EXAMPLE, AT THE PARTY'S 50TH
ANNIVERSARY FETE ON OCTOBER 10, THE MAIN SPEECH,
DELIVERED BY THE NEW DEFENSE MINISTER, CRITICIZED NEITHER
THE US OR THE AGREED FRAMEWORK.

KEEPING A FIREBREAK.

[1](#)7. THOSE BACKING THE AGREEMENT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO ISOLATE
THE KEDO TALKS FROM THE HARSH RHETORICAL EXCHANGES
BETWEEN THE NORTH AND SOUTH. THE NORTH'S VENOMOUS
RESPONSE TO PROVOCATIVE ROK STATEMENTS HAS NOT KEPT IT
FROM NEGOTIATING ACROSS THE TABLE WITH ROK DELEGATES.
SUCH COMPARTMENTALIZATION OF ISSUES IS RARE DURING A TRUE
CRISIS OR POLICY REVERSAL.

LEADERSHIP LOGJAM.

¶8. WE BELIEVE THE DPRK LEADERSHIP IS SHARPLY DIVIDED, AND THAT THE FRAMEWORK IS A SYMBOL OF WHAT ITS CRITICS FEAR (AND ITS PROPONENTS HOPE) WILL BECOME THE NEW REGIME'S DIRECTION ON A BROAD RANGE OF FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC ISSUES.

¶9. PRAGMATISTS SEEM TO FEAR A LOSS OF MOMENTUM IN THE FRAMEWORK PROCESS, WHICH WOULD UNDERCUT THEIR ARGUMENT THAT THE AGREEMENT BRINGS TANGIBLE BENEFITS TO THE NORTH. THEY APPARENTLY SOLD THE AGREED FRAMEWORK AS A GOOD BARGAIN--THE START OF A PROCESS THAT WOULD LEAD TO A LESSENING OF MILITARY PRESSURES AND INCREASED FOREIGN ECONOMIC COOPERATION. NOW, THEY ARE UNDER ATTACK FOR HAVING COMPROMISED DPRK SECURITY AND GAINED LITTLE IN RETURN.

¶10. SHOWDOWN APPROACHING? A LENGTHY ARTICLE IN THE PARTY NEWSPAPER EARLY THIS MONTH SUGGESTS THAT A SHOWDOWN IS NEARING. IN DISCUSSING THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION, THE ARTICLE ALLUDED TO KHRUSHCHEV'S DE-STALINIZATION CAMPAIGN, ARGUING THAT "ENEMIES AT HOME AND ABROAD, USING THE ALLEGED PERSONALITY CULT AS AN EXCUSE, LAUNCHED ATTACKS AND COMMITTED TRAITOROUS ACTS TO DAMAGE HIS (STALIN'S) AUTHORITY; THE COUNTRY WAS RUINED WHEN HIS IDEAS AND ACHIEVEMENT WERE COMPLETELY REJECTED AND NEGATED." THE ARTICLE WENT ON TO WARN AGAINST HAVING "ILLUSIONS ABOUT THE ENEMY'S CONSPIRATORIAL PEACE OVERTURES."

¶11. THE ARTICLE APPEARS TO BE AN ESCALATION OF THE LONG-RUNNING DEBATE BETWEEN THE REGIME'S PRAGMATISTS AND HARDLINERS. IN THE CURRENT SITUATION, REFERENCES TO A "PERSONALITY CULT" AND DE-STALINIZATION COUPLED WITH WARNINGS ABOUT THE ENEMY'S "PEACE STRATEGY" ARE THE POLITICAL EQUIVALENT OF NUCLEAR WARFARE. THE ARTICLE NECESSARILY RAISES THE QUESTION OF WHO--ASSUMING IT IS NOT KIM JONG IL--IS BEING SET UP TO PLAY THE ROLE OF KHRUSHCHEV.

¶12. SUCH RHETORIC SUGGESTS THAT THE SITUATION IS MOVING TOWARD A SHOWDOWN. KIM JONG IL, WHOM INR BELIEVES LEANS TOWARD HIS MORE PRAGMATIC ADVISORS, WOULD NO DOUBT LIKE TO RESOLVE IT WITHOUT FIREWORKS. NEVERTHELESS, EVERYONE IN THE LEADERSHIP (KIM MOST OF ALL) KNOWS THAT KIM IL SUNG HAD TO PUT DOWN SEVERAL COUP ATTEMPTS IN THE LATE 1950S BEFORE FIRMLY ESTABLISHING HIS POSITION.

¶13. PRESSURE INCREASING. THE CHANCES OF A NEAR-TERM SHOWDOWN ARE INCREASED BY UNREMITTING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STRAINS AND POLITICAL PRESSURES GENERATED BY THE SLOW-MOTION SUCCESSION. A HARSH WINTER, PUSHING THE ECONOMY AND SOCIAL CONTROLS TO THE BREAKING POINT, WOULD PROBABLY BE MORE THAN THE FRAGILE POLITICAL SYSTEM COULD ENDURE. BY SPRING, FOOD SHORTAGES MAY BE THE WORST SINCE THE KOREAN WAR.

¶14. PARTICULARLY DISTURBING IS EVIDENCE THAT THE CENTER IS NO LONGER ABLE TO HANDLE THE FOOD SITUATION AND IS TELLING LOCAL AUTHORITIES THAT THEY ARE ON THEIR OWN. THAT MESSAGE WILL SEND SHOCKWAVES THROUGH THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND SORELY TEST SOCIAL CONTROL MECHANISMS.

¶15. WILL THE GENERALS STEP IN? SUCH A SCENARIO IS UNLIKELY TO LEAD TO A SOFT LANDING--THAT IS, PEACEFUL TRANSFORMATION AND EVENTUAL REUNIFICATION WITH THE SOUTH. RATHER, A SHARPLY DETERIORATING ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SITUATION IS LIKELY TO TRIGGER A TAKEOVER BY HARDLINE MILITARY ELEMENTS--"TRUE BELIEVERS," FOR WHOM DISCIPLINE AND MORAL RECTITUDE CAN OVERCOME ANY ADVERSITY, AND WHO SEE COMPROMISE WITH "EVIL" AS DEFEAT.

¶16. FOR YEARS, THESE HARDLINERS HAVE BEEN CHAFING AT WHAT THEY SEE AS A DANGEROUS DRIFT TOWARD POLICIES OF OPENING AND REFORM. THEY HAVE BEEN ESPECIALLY ALARMED BY EVENTS SINCE THE DEATH OF KIM IL SUNG. NEVER HAPPY WITH THE SUCCESSION PLANS, THEY HAVE WATCHED WITH CONSTERNATION AS KIM JONG IL HAS MOVED STEP-BY-STEP

TOWARDS AN ACCOMMODATION WITH THE US AND EXPERIMENTATION
WITH ECONOMIC REFORM.

¶17. UP TO NOW, KIM, LIKE HIS FATHER, HAS BEEN ABLE TO
KEEP THE MOST CONSERVATIVE ELEMENTS IN LINE. BUT
PRAGMATISTS IN THE REGIME FEAR THAT, IF THINGS REMAIN AS
THEY ARE, HE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO DO SO MUCH LONGER. A
HIGH-RANKING PARTY OFFICIAL RECENTLY WARNED A FOREIGN
ACADEMIC THAT AN INTERNAL CRISIS WAS APPROACHING; HE
EMPHASIZED THAT THE MILITARY WAS DOMINATED BY DOGMATISTS
WHO LOOK ONLY TO VIOLENCE TO SOLVE PROBLEMS. EARLIER
THIS MONTH, A DPRK DIPLOMAT TOLD A US OFFICIAL THAT THE
MILITARY WAS DETERMINED THAT ANY COLLAPSE OF THE NORTH
"WOULD NOT BE PEACEFUL." EVEN A HIGH-LEVEL KOREAN
PEOPLE'S ARMY OFFICER PRIVATELY WARNED A FEW MONTHS AGO
THAT IT WAS IMPORTANT TO START US-DPRK MILITARY CONTACTS
BECAUSE THE ARMY WAS BECOMING RESTLESS AND HAD DANGEROUS
PLANS. (SECRET) (RCARLIN/JMERRILL)

CHRISTOPHER